

Penny's Lullaby -- the Great Depression

November 13th, 1929

My name is Penny Dayton. I'm sixteen years old, born in 1913, and raised along with my two brothers and three sisters. My family lives on four acres of farm in Tennessee, and although it's 1929 and the Great Depression has hit us hard, nothing can stop my family's spirit from crashing. Living in Tennessee has been the best experience of my life. The lush green trees and the gorgeous purple irises that grow in the summer time are the only things that keep us going in these hard times. Hopefully my mother will be able to afford more seeds this year, or else our garden will be trashed by the time winter comes around. Our farm has significantly shrunk in the last couple of months, and we're beginning to run out of room for our pigs, cows, and goats. We've already had to sell our best milk cow, Bessie. Our farm will probably be foreclosed if we don't pay the rent next month! There is a little hope though. I heard that Congress just passed a piece of legislation called the Agricultural Marketing Act, and it will help our family keep our farm in good shape. Although the stock market has pretty much completely crashed, our family is still attempting to have some hope for the future.

March 21st, 1930

Today I was walking home from school and I passed a Hooverville. Some of the homeless men stared at me and I could feel the pain in their eyes; like they were reaching out to me for help. I almost take pity on President Hoover. If I were him I would despise being blamed for the crash of my entire country. The man that looked up at me from his shack sparked some inspiration in me. Tomorrow I think I'll go downtown and see if I could help anyone at the soup kitchen. When I got home, my mother was lying on the couch with her feet up in the air. Poor thing. She looked so tired and beat. After birthing and raising six children, milking the cows and goats, tending to the garden to harvest dinner, and a lack of money to buy beauty products, my mother looks much older than she truly is. Maybe one day I'll have enough money saved up to buy my mother that golden tube of bright red lipstick in the beauty shop on Main Street. I how I would love to see the surprise on her face!

May 17th, 1933

I have a friend named Gracie Ann, who lives in southwest Kansas. We got a letter from her family yesterday asking if they could come stay with us! The Dust Bowl has greatly affected the Midwest, and the soil on their farm is so terribly dry! Due to the lack of rain, their soil was so dry that their farm wasn't able to produce any crops, and the government foreclosed on their property. Although there have been some hard adjustments to get through, I think we're holding up quite well. Hopefully anyways. When my mother was younger she used to work as a nurse at the local hospital, and one day a young woman burst through the doors, screaming in pain. Jennifer Benton gave birth to Gracie Ann, and we grew up together in Tennessee before her family was forced to move away because they couldn't afford to rent a house. After they got to Kansas, Gracie Ann's father tragically passed away in factory accident. Mrs. Benton was left a widow to take care of her only daughter. They have lived through some hard time, and I think this last struggle will finally bring us together. Oh, I can't wait until they get here!

July 10th, 1934

This year in Tennessee, the summer is marvelous. Mother is trying to keep her garden well kept, and Gracie Ann and I are having the best of times! Just last year President Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected. He recently ended his first Hundred Days, and I think he's doing such a marvelous job to save us from the despair of the Great Depression. Summer is full of work for my family. My eldest brother, Will, got a job working for the Civilian Conservation Corps. He absolutely loves it! He's made so many friends and done some amazing work for forest conservation. Will always jokes around now about he can save us all from forest fires, and I giggle every time. My father is also much happier since leaving Tennessee. He picked up work with the Public Works Administration and he's renewed his love for construction. Every once in awhile I can tell how my father misses his job at the Tennessee Valley Authority. He acquired some lifelong friends and built some gorgeous dams. His own work and the work of his colleagues allowed for water to flow freely and clearly throughout the South. The reservoir systems have prevented potential flooding, and now my old home will enjoy a happy life of leisure forever.

January 30th, 1935

This morning, I peeked into my brother Johnny's room and he had his eyes glued on Grant Wood's painting American Gothic, studying how the brush strokes hit the canvas. One day he hopes to be a painter, and this year he is able to show his talents to the community. Through a program of the Works Progress Administration, "Federal Number One" has offered work to local artists. In fact, just the other day Johnny painted a mural on the side wall of Mr. Tanner's Bakery Shop. It looks so gorgeous! I've also been playing around with music lately. I'm hoping to get a guitar this next Christmas so I can practice writing my own music. If only we could get out of this Great Depression...

February 4th, 1938

I feel so horrible for not writing in my diary! Gracie Ann and her mother came to live with us, but shortly after the government seized our property and we lost our farm. We have been through many struggles and adjustments, but our families have become very close. We relocated all the way to Southern California, in a tiny rural area. My father was able to begin another farm, which is beginning to thrive under the warm California weather. Although, we're far from being well off. Father had saved up money from his job at the Public Works Administration and we were able to buy a couple pigs and a milk cow! Today Gracie Ann and I went to go see Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, the first feature-length animated film! It was so wonderful! It's nice to be able to escape the realities at home. One thing's for sure...I would love to meet Walt Disney! After we came back from the movies, my sister Rebecca had the radio turned on. She was listening to one of those silly soap operas again! My mother quickly grabbed the dial though, and turned the station to one of Roosevelt's fireside chats. Somehow we managed to suffer through the Roosevelt Recession of 1937, but now I think things are finally looking up.

September 12th, 1941

The Great Depression is finally over! Things are so much better now. The rain in California is just the right amount, and our farm is doing excellent. Just yesterday father was able to buy a brand new Ford Model T! I may even talk him into letting me borrow it sometime. My brothers and sisters are all enjoying their work, and mother is looking more beautiful than ever. All that advertising the media puts out has got to her, and she

was finally able to buy that tube of red lipstick. Gracie Ann is doing wonderful too. She has her own little house right next to ours with her husband that works as a stock broker. As for me, things are going exceptionally spectacular! My brother Will was nice enough to buy me a guitar for my birthday this year, and I've been practicing my music. The joy I feel whenever I sing just lifts my spirits, and I can tell that's where my true passion lies. I wrote a song about how my family has been able to live through the Great Depression. I'm considering going into the city this weekend to see what happens. Maybe someone will enjoy my very own lullaby...

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